

A JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN LEGATION IN BELGIUM

Hugh Gibson, Witness



Continued from preceding page

FRIEND OR SPY?



(Copyright, 1917, Otto F. Wood)

King Albert and General von Emmich, who commanded the German troops at Liège. This picture was taken in 1913.

TYPES OF CAVALRYMEN



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These are pictures of the mounted soldiers who first disputed the frontier outposts of Belgium with the Kaiser's Uhlans.

bowsky, a typical white-haired German functionary, was pottering about with sealing wax and strips of paper, sealing the archives and answering questions in a deliberate and perfectly calm way. It was for all the world like a scene in a play. The shaded room, the two nervous diplomats registering anxiety and strain, the old functionary who was to stay behind to guard the archives and refused to be moved from his calm by the approaching calamity. It seemed altogether unreal, and I had to keep bringing myself back to a realization of the fact that it was only too true and too serious.

They were very ominous about what an invasion means to this country, and kept referring to the army as a steam roller that will leave nothing standing in its path. Stumm kept repeating: "Oh, the poor fools! Why don't they get out of the way of the steam roller? We don't want to hurt them, but if they stand in our way they will be ground into the dirt. Oh, the poor fools!"

The government had a special train ready for the German diplomatic and consular officers who were to leave, and they got away about 7. Now, thank goodness, they are safely in Holland and speeding back to their own country.

Before leaving Bülow gave out word that we would look after German interests, and consequently we have been deluged with frightened people ever since.

Remaining Germans Paralyzed With Fright

All the Germans who have remained here seem to be paralyzed with fright, and have for the most part taken refuge in convents, schools, etc. There are several hundreds of them in the German Consulate General which has been provisioned as for a siege. Popular feeling is, of course, running high against them, and there may be incidents, but so far nothing has happened to justify the panic.

This morning a Belgian priest, the Abbé Umans, came in to say that he had several hundred Germans under his care and wanted some provision made for getting them away before the situation got any worse.

After talking the matter over with the minister and getting his instructions I took the abbé in tow, and with M. de Léval went to the Foreign Office to see about getting a special train to take these people across the border into Holland and thence into Germany.

At first the suggestion was received with some resentment, and I was told flatly that there was no good reason for Belgium to hand over special trains to benefit Germans when every car was needed for military operations.

I pleaded that consideration must be shown these helpless people, and that this course was just as much in the interest of Belgium as of anybody else, as it would remove the danger of violence, with possible reprisals, and would relieve the overworked police force of onerous duties. After some argument Baron Donny went with me to the Sûreté Publique, where we went over the matter again with the chief.

Asked Special Train To Take Germans Out

He got the point at once and joined forces with us in a request to the Minister of Railways for a special train. We soon arranged matters as far as the Belgian frontier.

I then telephoned through to The Hague, got Marshal Langhorne and asked him to request the Dutch government to send another train to the frontier to pick our people up and send them through to Germany. He went off with a right good will to arrange that, and I hope to have an answer in the morning.

We plan to start the train on Friday morning at 4 o'clock, so as to get our people through the streets when there are few people about. We are making it known that all Germans who wish to leave should put in an appearance by that time, and it looks as though we should have from seven hundred to a thousand to provide for. It will be a great relief to get them off, and I hold my breath until the train is safely gone.

The Belgian government is making no distinction between Germans, and is letting those liable for military service get away with the others.

Wild stories have begun to circulate about what is bound to happen to Americans and other foreigners when hostilities get nearer to Brussels, and we have had to spend much time that could have been devoted to better things in calming a lot of excitable people of both sexes. I finally

dug out the plan of organization of the foreigners for the Siege of Péking, and suggested to the minister that, in order to give these people something to do and let them feel that something was being done, we should get them together and appoint them all on committees to look after different things.

Americans All Busy as Beavers

This was done to-day. Committees were appointed to look for a house where Americans could be assembled in case of hostilities in the immediate vicinity of Brussels; to look after the food supply; to attend to catering; to round up Americans and see that they get to the place of refuge when the time comes; to look after destitute Americans, etc.

Now they are all happy and working like beavers, although there is little chance that their work will serve any useful purpose aside from keeping them occupied.

We got Mrs. Shaler to open up the Students' Club, which had been closed for the summer, so that the colony can have a place to meet and work for the Red Cross and keep its collective mind off the gossip that is flying about.

Last night our cipher telegrams to Washington were sent back from the telegraph office with word that under the latest instructions from the government they could not be forwarded. The minister and I hurried over to the Foreign Office, where we found several of the colleagues on the same errand. It was all a mistake, due to the fact that the General Staff had issued a sweeping order to stop all cipher messages without stopping to consider our special case. It was fixed after some debate, and the minister and I came back to the shop and got off our last telegrams, which were finished at 3 this morning.

I was back at my desk by a little after 8 and have not finished this day's work, although it is after midnight. I have averaged from three to five hours sleep since the trouble began and, strange to say, I thrive on it.

I have called several times to-day at the French and British legations to get the latest news. They keep as well posted as is possible in the prevailing confusion, and are most generous and kind in giving us everything they properly can.

Germans Driven Back at Liège

There seems to have been a serious engagement to-day at Liège, which the Germans are determined to reduce before proceeding toward France. The report is that the attack was well resisted and the Germans driven back with heavy loss. A number of prisoners have been taken and were being brought into Brussels this evening along with the wounded. In the course of the fighting there was a sort of charge of the Light Brigade; one squadron of Belgian lancers was obliged to attack six times its number of Germans and was cut to pieces, only one officer escaping. The morale of the Belgians is splendid.

This afternoon as the minister and I were going to call on the British minister we passed the King and his staff headed off the Rue de la Loi for the front. They looked like business.

Several times to-day I have talked over the telephone with the embassy in London. They seem to be as strong on rumors as we are here. One rumor I was able to pass on to Bell was to the effect that the British flag had been sunk by German mines with another big warship. Another to the effect that five German ships have been destroyed by the French fleet off the coast of Algeria, etc., etc.

Red Cross Ready To Handle Wounded

The Red Cross is hard at work getting ready to handle the wounded and everybody is doing something. Nearly everybody with a big house has fitted it in whole or in part as a hospital. Others are rolling bandages and preparing all sorts of supplies.

The military attachés are all going about in uniform now. Each legation has a flag on its motor and the letters C. D., which are supposed to stand for Corps Diplomatique, although nobody knows it. I have seized Mrs. Boyd's big car for my own use. D. L. Blount has put his car at the disposal of the minister and is to drive it himself. There is talk already of moving the court and the government to Antwerp, to take refuge behind the fortifications. When the Germans

advance beyond Liège the government will, of course, have to go, and the diplomatic corps may follow. It would be a nuisance for us, and I hope we may be able to avoid it.

Germans are having an unhappy time, and I shall be happier when they are across the border. Nothing much seems to have happened to them beyond having a few shops wrecked in Antwerp and one or two people beaten up here.

One case that came to my knowledge was an outraged man who had been roughly handled and could not understand why. All he had done was to stand in front of a café where the little tables are on the sidewalk and remark: "Talk all the French you can. You'll soon have to talk German." Of course there are a lot of Belgians, Swiss and Dutch who rejoice in good German names and they are not having a pleasant time. One restaurant called Chez Fritz I saw when coming along the Boulevard this evening had hung out a blackboard with the proud device: "Fritz est Luxembourgeois, mais sa Maison est Belge." (Fritz is a Luxembourger, but his house is Belgian.)

He was taking no chances on having his place smashed.

In Search of Secret Wireless Station

August 6th.—This morning when I came into the legation I found the Minister of Justice in top hat and frock coat waiting to see somebody.

He had received a report that a wireless station had been established on top of a German Legation and was being run by the people who were left in the building. He came to ask the minister's consent to send a judge to look, see and draw up a *procès verbal*. In our own artless little American way we suggested that it might be simpler to go straight over and find out how much there was to the report. The Minister of Justice had a couple of telegraph linemen with him, and as soon as Mr. Whitlock could get his hat the French fleet off the coast of Algeria, etc., etc.

When we got there we found that the only way onto the roof was by a long perpendicular ladder leading to a trap door. We all scrambled up this—all but the Minister of Justice, who remained behind in the garret with his top hat.

Everybody Stiffened By Intermittent Hiss

We looked the place over very carefully, and the workmen—evidently in order to feel that they were doing something—cut a few wires, which probably resulted in great inconvenience to perfectly harmless people further along the street. But there was no evidence of a wireless outfit.

One of the men started to explain to me how that proved nothing at

all; that an apparatus was now made that could be concealed in a hat and brought out at night to be worked. He stopped in the middle of a word, for suddenly we heard the rasping intermittent hiss of a wireless very near at hand. Everybody stiffened up like a lot of pointers, and in a minute had located the plant. It was nothing but a rusty girouette on top of a chimney being turned by the wind and scratching spitefully at every turn.

The discovery eased the strain and everybody laughed. Then there was another sound, and we all turned around to see a trap door raised and the serene, bemused face of my friend Cavalcanti looked out on us in bewilderment. In our search we had strayed over onto the roof of the Brazilian Legation.

It seemed to cause him some surprise to see us doing second-story work on their house. It was a funny situation—but ended in another laugh. It is a good thing we can work in a laugh now and then.

The day was chiefly occupied with perfecting arrangements for getting off our German refugees. The Minister wished the job on me, and I with some elements of executive ability myself gave the worst part of it to Nasmith, the Vice-Consul-General. Modifications became necessary every few minutes, and Léval and I were running around like stricken deer all day, seeing the disheartening number of government officials who were concerned, having changes made and asking for additional trains.

German Refugees A Troublesome Burden

During the afternoon more and more Germans came pouring into the consulate for refuge, until there were over two thousand of them there, terribly crowded and unhappy. Several convents were also packed, and we calculated that we should have two or three thousand to get out of the country. In the morning the legation was besieged by numbers of poor people who did not know which way to turn and came to us because they had been told that we would take care of them.

We were all kept busy; and Léval, smothering his natural feelings, came out of his own accord and talked and advised and calmed the frightened people in their own language. None of us would have asked him to do it, but he was fine enough to want to help and to do it without any fuss.

A crowd of curious people gathered outside the legation to watch the callers, and now and then they booed a German.

I looked out of the window in time to see somebody in the crowd strike at a poor little worm of a man who had just gone out the door. He was excited and foolish enough to reach toward his hip pocket as though for a revolver. In an instant the crowd

fell on him and although Gustave, the messenger, and I rushed out we were just in time to pull him inside and slam the door before they had a chance to polish him off. Gustave nearly had his clothes torn off in the scrimmage, but stuck to his job.

An inspired idiot of an American tourist who was inside tried to get the door open and address the crowd in good American, and I had to handle him most undiplomatically to keep him from getting us all into trouble. The crowd thumped on the door a little in imitation of a mob scene, and the Garde Civique had to be summoned on the run from the German Legation to drive them back and establish some semblance of order.

Civilians Warned Not to Fight Invaders

Then de Léval and I went out and talked to the crowd—that is to say, we went out and he talked to the crowd. He told them very reasonably that they were doing harm to Belgium, as actions of this sort might bring reprisals which would cost the country dear, and that they must control their feelings.

He sounded the right note so successfully that the crowd broke up with a cheer.

Orders have been issued to permit free use of the telephone and telegraph, although they have been cut for everybody else. Yesterday afternoon I talked with the consulates at Ghent and Antwerp. They were both having their troubles with Germans who wanted to get out of the country. I told them to send everybody up here and let them report at their own consulate, where they will be looked after.

The government is taking no chances of having trouble because of the doings of franc-tireurs. The Minister of the Interior sent out, on the 4th, a circular to every one of the 2,700 communes in the country to be posted everywhere.

The circular points out in simple and emphatic terms the duty of civilians to refrain from hostile acts, and makes it clear that civilians might be executed for such acts. Aside from this, every newspaper in the country has printed the following notice signed by the Minister of the Interior:

To Civilians

The Minister of the Interior advises civilians, in case the enemy should show himself in their district:

Not to fight;

To utter no insulting or threatening words;

To remain within their houses and close the windows, so that it will be impossible to allege that there has been any provocation;

To evacuate any houses or small villages which may be occupied by soldiers in order to defend themselves, so that it cannot be alleged that civilians have fled;

An act of violence committed by a single civilian would be a crime for

which the law provides arrest and punishment. It is all the more reprehensible in that it might serve as a pretext for measures of repression resulting in bloodshed and pillage or the massacre of the innocent population with women and children.

Congress Moves to Relief of Americans

In the course of the afternoon we got our telegrams telling of the appropriation by Congress of two and a half millions for the relief of Americans in Europe and the dispatch of the Tennessee with the money on board. Now all hands want some of the money and a cabin on the Tennessee to go home in.

—, the wheat king, came into the legation this morning and was very grateful because we contrived to cash out of our own pockets a twenty-dollar express check for him. He was flat broke with his pocket bulging with checks and was living in a pension at six francs a day. There is going to be a lot of discomfort and suffering unless some money is made available pretty soon.

The worst of it is that this is the height of the tourist season and Europe is full of school teachers and other people who came over for short trips with meager resources, carefully calculated to get them through their travelling and home again by a certain date. If they are kept long they are going to be in a bad way.

One of our American colony here, Heinemann, had a goodly store of currency and had placed it at the disposal of the legation, to be used in cashing at face value traveller's checks and other similar paper which bankers will not touch now with a pair of tongs.

Shaler has taken charge of that end of the business and has all the customers he can handle. Heinemann will have to bide his time to get any money back on all his collection of paper, and his contribution has meant a lot to people who will never know who helped them.

Diplomats Discuss Moving to Antwerp

There was a meeting of the diplomatic corps last night to discuss the question of moving with the court to Antwerp in certain eventualities. It is not expected that the government will move unless and until the Germans get through Liège and close enough to threaten Louvain, which is only a few miles off of Brussels.

There was no unanimous decision on the subject, but if the court goes the minister and I will probably take turns going up, so as to keep in communication with the government.

There is not much we can accomplish there, and we have so much to do here that it will be hard for either of us to get away. It appears to some of the colleagues to take refuge with a court in distress, but I can see little attraction in the idea of settling down inside the line of

forts and waiting for them to be pounded with heavy artillery.

Liège seems to be holding out still. The Belgians have astonished everybody, themselves included. It was generally believed even here that the most they could do was to make a futile resistance and get slaughtered in a foolhardy attempt to defend their territory against invasion.

They have, however, held off a powerful German attack for three of four days. It is altogether marvelous. All papers have the headlines: "Les forts tiennent toujours." "The forts still hold."

In the course of the afternoon we arranged definitely that at 3 o'clock this morning there should be ample train accommodation ready at the Gare du Nord to get our Germans out of the country. Nasmith and I are to go down and observe the entire proceedings, so that we can give an authoritative report afterward.

Rumor Makes Mob Appear Dangerous

There is a German-American girl married to a German who lives across the street from me. I sent her word to-day that she and her husband and little boy had better get away while there was a way open.

Last evening while we were at dinner at the legation the three of them arrived in a panic. They had heard that there was a mob of 10,000 people about the German Consulate about to break in and kill every German in the place. Of course they could not be persuaded to go near the consulate or any of the other refuges.

They wanted to settle down and stay at the legation. As the minister was on his way out to the meeting of the corps, the woman laydied him, had got down on her knees and kissed his hand and grovelled and had hysterics. He called for me and we got them quieted down. I finally agreed to go down to the consulate and take a look so as to reassure them.

When I got there I found that the streets had been barred off by the military for two blocks in every direction, and that there was only a small crowd gathered to see what might happen. About as hostile as a lot of children.

I got through the line of troops and in front of the consulate found several hundreds of the refugees who had been brought out to be marched to the Cirque Royale, where they could be more comfortably lodged until it was time to start for the train.

Crowd Guarded Into Indoor Circus

They were surrounded by placid Gardes Civiques and were all frightened to death. They had had nothing to do for days but talk over the terrible fate that awaited them if the bloodthirsty population of Brussels ever got at them; the stories had grown so that the crowd had hypnotized itself and was ready to credit any yarn.

The authorities showed the greatest consideration they could under their orders. They got the crowd started and soon had them stowed away inside the Cirque Royale, an indoor circus near the consulate. Once they got inside, a lot of them gave way to their feelings and began to weep and wail in a way that bade fair to set off the entire crowd. One of the officers came out to where I was and begged me to come in and try my hand at quieting them.

I climbed up on a trunk and delivered an eloquent address to the effect that nobody had any designs on them; that the whole interest of the Belgian government lay in getting them safely across the frontier; called their attention to the way the Garde Civique was working to make

them comfortable, and to reassure them promised that I would go with them to the station, put them on their trains and see them safely off for the frontier.

That particular crowd cheered up somewhat, but I could not get near enough to be heard by the entire outfit at one time, so one of the officers dragged me around from one part of the building to another until I had harangued the entire crowd on the instalment plan. They all knew that we were charged with their interests, and there was nearly a riot when I wanted to leave. They expected me to stay right there until they were taken away.

Mrs. Whitlock Helps Quiet Hysterical People

I came back to the legation and told my people that the way was clear and that they had nothing to worry about. Mrs. Whitlock and Miss Darnier had taken the family in hand, were petting the baby boy and had them all cheered up to a sensible state of mind. I got them down to the motor and whisked them down to the lines that were drawn about the block. Here we were stopped and, sooner than undertake a joint debate with the sentry, I was for descending and going the rest of the way on foot.

When a few of the idly curious gathered about the car, the woman nearly had a fit and scrambled back into the car almost in spasms. Of course the scene drew some more people and we soon had a considerable crowd. I gathered up the boy—who was a beauty and not at all afraid—and took him out of the car. There was in the front rank an enormous Belgian with a fiercely bristling beard. He looked like a sane sort, so I said to him: "Expliquez à ces gens que vous n'êtes pas des ogres pour croquer les enfants." ("Explain to these people that you are not the kind of men who devour babies.") He growled out affably: "Mais non, on ne mange pas les enfants, ni leurs mères." ("No, indeed, one does not eat babies nor their mothers.") and gathered up the baby and passed him about for the others to look at.

It Was Altogether A Night of Horror

My passengers then decided that they were not in such mortal danger and consented to get out. An officer I knew came along and offered to escort them inside.

On the way in I ran into Madame Carton de Wiart, wife of the Minister of Justice, who was there to do what she could to make things run smoothly. She is rabid about the Germans, but is not for taking it out on these helpless people. And that seems to be the spirit of everybody, although it would be quite understandable if they showed these people some of their resentment. The Gardes were bestirring themselves to look after their charges. Some of them had contributed their pocket money and had bought chocolate and milk for the children and mineral waters and other odds and ends for those that needed them. And some of them are not very sure as to how long they will have pocket money for themselves. Aside from the fright and the heat and the noise of that crowd in the Cirque, it was all pretty depressing.

During the night one old man died—probably from fright and shock—and a child was born. It was altogether a night of horror that could perfectly well have been avoided if people had only been able to keep calm and stay at home until time for the train to leave.

Having settled my charges and taken a look round, I went back to the legation and got off some telegrams and talked with Bell over the telephone. He had a lot of news that we had not received and many errands to be done for people who had friends and relatives here.

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The Gibson diary will run daily and Sunday until finished. In to-morrow's instalment will be a description of the Germans' flight from Belgium, in panic lest the Belgians do unto them as later Germans were to do unto Belgians.